For Christmas, 1985

T-28

# THE FORT OF TACUIL

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As it happened, I came to spend the summer at Tacuil, the old domain of my ancestors, who held it as a royal grant. This district, owing to its rugged topography, was the scene of Indian wars in pre-hispanic times and of enormous butchery during the bloody period of the Conquest.

Tacuil is a succession of small, fertile hollows hidden among the immense ridges of rock that form the eastern spurs of the Andean plateau. It is still the gateway and the only route between the Uplands of Atacama and the valleys of Cachi, Molinos, and San Carlos.

Two or three mountain streams, which the tenants have providently dammed and diverted through a system of irrigation ditches, fertilize the valuable crops of the estate.

The gorge through which the river of Tacuil rushes down to the valley of Molinos is so narrow and rugged that even on foot it is impossible to climb out of the hollow by following the course of the stream. Across from my house, not far from this gorge, the trail, drawing away from the stream, rises and winds painfully around the flank of the mountain: This ascent, which can be negotiated only on horseback, gives access to the highlands.

At the opposite end of the estate, another steep trail, that of the Fort, scales a mountainside to go around the head of the gorge through which the river falls as it descends from the plateau.

From tradition and from numerous archaeological remains, it is known that this privileged district, with cultivated lands extending for more than a league, was the target of continual raids,

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at harvest-time, by Pular Indians who came from the valley of Lerma, and by savage hordes of shepherd[1] tribes who burst out of the uplands.

Thanks to the singular situation of the estate, the tribes of hard-working Calchaquí Indians who inhabited the site were able to defend themselves effectively. At one end they dominated from a height with their slings and arrows the road of the Pulars, and at the other end they were able to cover from the parapets of the Fort the trail of the Atacamas.

It was with this famous fort that I wanted to become acquainted. On coming into view of Tacuil as one travels along the slope from Molinos and taking in at a glance the green expanse of the oasis, the first thing that draws one's attention in the background is the red stain of the Fort at the foot of immense tawny-colored mountains.

Seeing it at a distance one would call it a construction of the Cyclops'; so vast are its proportions and so symmetrical the vertical cliffs that rise on all sides to the horizontal plateau that crowns it[2].

After a month's stay at the estate, only yesterday did I find it possible to organize the excursion that I had planned. From my previous inquiries among the Indians I concluded that none of them liked the idea of going with me. Not that they flatly opposed my plans for archaeological investigation; but they always replied to my urgings with some ambiguous objection.

"Twenty years ago," I was told by the gardener of the establishment, the lame Felipe Sandoval, "I went up there with don Levy, the English engineer who died below the Fort from a fall off a cliff. ... It is not good, Patrón, to go poking around in the

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graves of the 'gentiles[3]'"

Felipe Sandoval is nearly fifty years old. He was lamed, his knee immobilized with the left leg bent at right angles, as the result of a fall that he sustained while repairing[4] the roof of his house. Because I belong to the family of his patrones and because I give him now and then a wad of coca leaves[5], he has acquired a great affection for me and applies himself with real fervor to the cultivation of his vegetables. His complexion is bronze, and he is lean like all the Calchaquís; but his intelligent little eyes, his broad forehead, his profile, and his goat-like whiskers make me suspect that he has a dose of Spanish blood in his veins, as is indicated, of course, by his traditional Spanish baptismal name.

"Do you think, then," I asked him, "that the 'gentiles', that is, the old-time Calchaquís, can revenge themselves on those who uncover their tombs?"

"Who knows? ... They say that the wind blows when no hail falls[6], and, in any case, the life of anyone who goes looking for corpses is in danger. You see what happened to the engineer. What a misfortune, Patrón! I was with him when he went up there. He had dug up some bones and skulls and was studying them. ... What did he think he was going to learn from them, Señor? He examined them from all sides. And then one day he took it into his head to go up to the Fort. He went up and got killed. He came down turning over and over in the air like a shot bird."

"But that was only a chance accident."

"No doubt, Patrón."

Let it be understood that I don't care one way or the other

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about aboriginal superstitions. The most educated and civilized persons adhere to the superstitions of their class or their profession; the belief in absurdities is inherent in the human condition.

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Yesterday, Sunday, December 16[7], very early in the morning, we at last started out on horseback for the Fort, with beautiful cloudy weather. The lame Sandoval and a boy, each provided with a pick, accompanied me. We penetrated deeper into Tacuil, passing along the borders of fields of wheat and of alfalfa in flower. The trail winds tortuously along the hillsides, separated from the cultivated fields by a granite wall that is broken only at long intervals by a narrow passageway that provides access to the homes of the tenants, situated on the lower ground next to the river.

All of the land that is capable of being irrigated has been put to use. Each homestead consists of a little vineyard, an orchard of apples and peaches, a vegetable garden, a henhouse, corrals and pens for goats and cattle; fields of wheat, alfalfa, and maize, and little thickets of carob trees and arcas[8].

Walls of grey granite or hedges of thorny bushes separate the various fields. There is a charming contrast between the green earth next to the springs, dotted with weeping willows, and the wild and rugged landscape in the background. This consists of enormous clusters of inaccessible ridges, of the color of old iron, having no other vegetation between the rocks than the tall thistles and the variegated patches of black, thorny, stunted brush.

Yellow flowers predominate amongst the furze. Gold on the

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flowers and rust on the mountains. The best of these yellow flowers is that of the amancay, a wild narcissus that is much more attractive than the domestic one, for, being equally beautiful, it has the advantage of a wonderfully sweet aroma similar to that of the orange blossom.

There is heard in the placid morning the cooing of the bumbunas[9] who, hidden in the quiet groves, lie in wait for the nearly ripe wheat. From time to time the tranquil air is rent by a sharp scream, a cry as of a small wild animal; it is the alarm of the pajarera[10] girls who with their slings contend against the birds for the daily bread, the promise of the pregnant wheat fields. Fleeting hummingbirds zoom across the trail, some red like glowing coals, others with gilded tails, brilliant as jewels.

After me rode the gardener, a knight on a sorry little horse, and, rather lagging behind as befitted his youthful shyness, Daniel, the boy. No matter how wide the road may be, with these Indians there is no way of travelling side by side. Whether their horses are accustomed to narrow mountain trails or whether it is so ordered by their habitual respect for the patrones, it is certain that when travelling with Indians one has to march in single file. Thus, the little I know of what I saw is owed to my habits as a curious observer, for every time I asked my squire about anything I had to rein in my horse and wait for the man to come within earshot of me. Not to mention the fact that his answers never conveyed any unequivocal affirmation. The Indians' thought is slow, indeterminate, passive. One has to force them to think, and draw their ideas from them with a corkscrew, as it were. We whites

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have a very different mental constitution. We abstract and generalize too much, and systematically catalogue any new ideas. The Indian doesn't think or reflect, or worry about classifying what he learns from experience. He only looks on, acclimates himself to his environment, and docilely adapts to circumstances.

A trait that surprises me in these men is their good manners, their correct etiquette, not only with the patrones, but even among themselves. They seem to have been brought up by English governesses. One never catches them in crudities of language or awkward gestures. Their natural refinement is due, no doubt, to the fact that the Calchaquís, from remotest antiquity, have been social, industrious, and civil. And this characteristic, so deeply rooted, of never contradicting the white man, of agreeing to everything, of never positively asserting anything -- rather than fear of others' opinions, is it not at bottom an exquisite tolerance, human warmth, and refined courtesy?

Meanwhile, I noticed that we had begun to climb the slope up to the fort. The arduous ascent lasted a little less than half an hour, during which we had to pause several times to let our horses catch their breath, so violent was the effort.

Imagine a mountain made of irregular blocks of red granite dropped from the clouds by a mythological crane[11]. The wind and the rain, crumbling the rocks over millions of years, have filled the interstices with a coarse sand that squeaks under the iron-shod hooves of the horses.

After reaching the top of the slope, the route stretches forward in a horizontal strip bounded on the right by the depths of the river, which flows a hundred meters below, and on the left

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by the colossal cliffs of the Fort, whose crests rise to two hundred meters above the trail. At this point I can take in at a glance the immensity of the monument, as one can only call the massive red cube that presents itself to me as an object for contemplation. The Fort dominates the road for a stretch of half a kilometer [roughly a third of a mile]. It is evident that a thousand men entrenched up there and armed with slings and arrows could defeat at this Thermopylae ten thousand invaders. I observe that the vermillion rock that forms the immense wall resembles tosca[12]. To climb up to the plateau itself, as I had planned, it was necessary to pass on foot through a narrow gorge that is dominated by its own block of mountain as high and precipitous as the main mass and in all respects analogous to it. In the mouth of this narrow ravine or gorge we dismounted and secured the horses. The Indian boy Daniel, being the most agile, took the lead. Contrary to what might have been expected in view of his lameness, old Sandoval followed me closely. His right-angled leg served as a hook when his bare foot gripped the tosca. His lean body hoisted itself light as a feather up the mountain, and in the difficult places his sharp profile was accentuated and acquired a surprising goat-like nervousness[13].

I was able to follow close behind the boy because I was wearing light sandals; though from time to time I was overcome by fatigue and stopped to wait for old Felipe.

As we were approaching the top, Sandoval called out:

"Go up slowly! Wait, wait, Patrón, don't be in a hurry. Don't go rushing ahead!"

The warning piqued my vanity a little and I was spurred by

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a desire to get to the top as quickly as possible. Thus it happened that as soon as Sandoval caught up with me I renewed the climb with greater energy.

I reached the top in four bounds and noticed that on my left was a vertical wall of rock and at my feet a broad slab projecting out into the void like a cornice. I had arrived at the entrance to the Fort. But at the precise moment when I was about to step forward onto the slab, I felt a violent jerk from behind, so that I was nearly thrown on my back. Old Sandoval had caught me by the trousers and now, panting, was fastening himself to my shoulders.

"What's the matter?" I cried.

All pale, the man was hardly able to stammer:

"Bad business to go ahead, Patrón! Senor Levy got himself killed on that rock."

And with his black, rough, long-nailed finger he pointed at the stone on which I had been about to step.

"So...?"

"That stone is a trap, Señor. God save you from treading on it!"

"How? What are you saying? ... What about Daniel? Isn't he going ahead? ... Forget about omens, man!"

"Daniel didn't fall because he is little, he is light, Patrón. If you step on it, the stone will tilt[14] and you will die down there like the gringo. I swear you'll be killed! It is the trap of the old one ..."

At last I recovered from my astonishment; I understood, I looked down at a heap of sharp rocks two hundred and fifty meters below, and a cold sweat bathed my forehead and the palms of my

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hands.

This is the extraordinary way in which I came to owe to the humble gardener of Tacuil as many years of life as may remain to me.

Well then: The trap really does exist. The slab tilts, by no more than six inches, about its center of gravity. It is the last stone of the paved walk that leads into the Fort, and is flat on top like the other stones. On the bottom it has a rounded projection that rests on a broad rock beneath.

I returned from the Fort without, I confess, any further inclination to initiate new archaeological investigations. Whether it is a work of nature or a product of human ingenuity, the trap impresses me as a maleficent entity inherent in the strange land that our ancestors despoiled. Let us, therefore, leave the mummies of the "gentiles" to sleep in the warmth of the earth, at the bottoms of their urns, like embryos ready to experience some later evolution of a fabulous order. We who have never respected their myths, let us, in mercy, respect the last will of the brave Calchaquí who, wounded in combat, knocked the wedge from under the trap and then threw himself in despair[15] to the bottom of the fatal "Huaico", seeking a less harsh end to his life than the sorry slavery of his race.

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NOTES

1. The term "shepherd" must refer to Indians who kept llamas or related animals.

2. The description of the Fort is not very clear. The original has: "... tan simétricas las murallas que encierran, por todos sus flancos, la meseta horizontal que lo corona." Literally: "... so symmetrical the vertical walls that enclose, on all sides, the horizontal plateau that crowns it." But if the horizontal plateau crowns the fort, how can it be enclosed by the walls? From the later part of the story I gather that the Fort is largely a natural formation more or less modified by man for use as a citadel. I assume that the "walls" referred to are cliffs that drop down on all sides from the plateau; which leads me to translate the sentence as I have. Perhaps the Spanish use of encerrar differs slightly from the English use of "enclose".

3. "Gentiles" here means "pagans," i.e., the pre-hispanic Indians.

4. The original has tortear, in quotes as if to indicate that the word as used here is a local colloquialism. The official meaning of tortear is to roll, flatten, or form with the hands, as a pancake. I conjecture, therefore, that the roof was of clay and that the man was doing repairs of some sort on it. The book has a glossary of local colloquialisms; its explanation of tortear is rather opaque, but seems generally to support the foregoing interpretation.

5. Narcotic leaves chewed by the aborigines. Apparently they are not generally gathered or grown by the user, but are an article

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of commerce. I quote Pedro de Cieza de León, La Crónica del Perú, which dates from 1553; Chapter XCVI:

"Throughout Peru it was and is customary to carry this coca in the mouth, and from morning until they go to sleep they carry it there without spitting it out. Asking some Indians for what cause they always have this herb in their mouths (which they do not eat or do anything with except carry it in their teeth), they say that they feel little hunger and find that they have great strength and vigor [because of the coca]. I think that something must cause it, though it rather appears to me to be a perverted habit appropriate to such people as are these Indians. In the Andes, from Guamanga to the town of Plata, this coca is planted, producing small trees, and they cultivate them and greatly pamper them so that they produce the leaf that they call coca, which is after the manner of myrtle, and they dry it in the sun ...

"There are some men in Spain who are rich with what they gained from this coca by buying it and reselling it and peddling it in the markets to the Indians."

The scientific name of the coca plant is Erythroxylon coca. It is the source of cocaine. Thus the Peruvian Indians were all a bunch of junkies; and apparently they still are, since I've read that at least in some areas the leaves are still habitually chewed today.

6. Evidently some proverb, of which the significance escapes me.

7. Late spring in Argentina, of course.

8. The regular meanings of arca don't seem to fit here. No

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doubt it is a local name for some tree or bush.

9. Apparently some type of dove or pigeon, since the glossary gives palomita as a synonym. Paloma = dove.

10. Literally, "birder" girls.

11. The reference is to a mechanical crane, not a bird.

12. I do not know exactly what tosca means here. Literally the word means "rough" or "crude". From the context I think it must refer to a species of stone.

13. The word is nerviosidad, which would ordinarily mean "nervousness". But an alternative meaning of nervioso is "wiry or sinewy"; hence the meaning may be that his face took on a taut, sinewy appearance.

14. I omit to translate here the phrase se le va a la cabeza, which I can't make sense of in this context.

15. The original has: "... knocked the wedge from under the trap and threw himself in despair ..." ; the word "then" following "and" is my insertion. When I first encountered this passage I was a little confused by it, because it sounded as if the Indian knocked out the wedge in order to throw himself from the cliff. But why not just jump? Now I think that what is meant is this: The Indian knocked the wedge loose so that the attackers would fall into the trap as they tried to enter the fort; then he jumped off the cliff. My insertion of the word "then" is intended to make this clearer.

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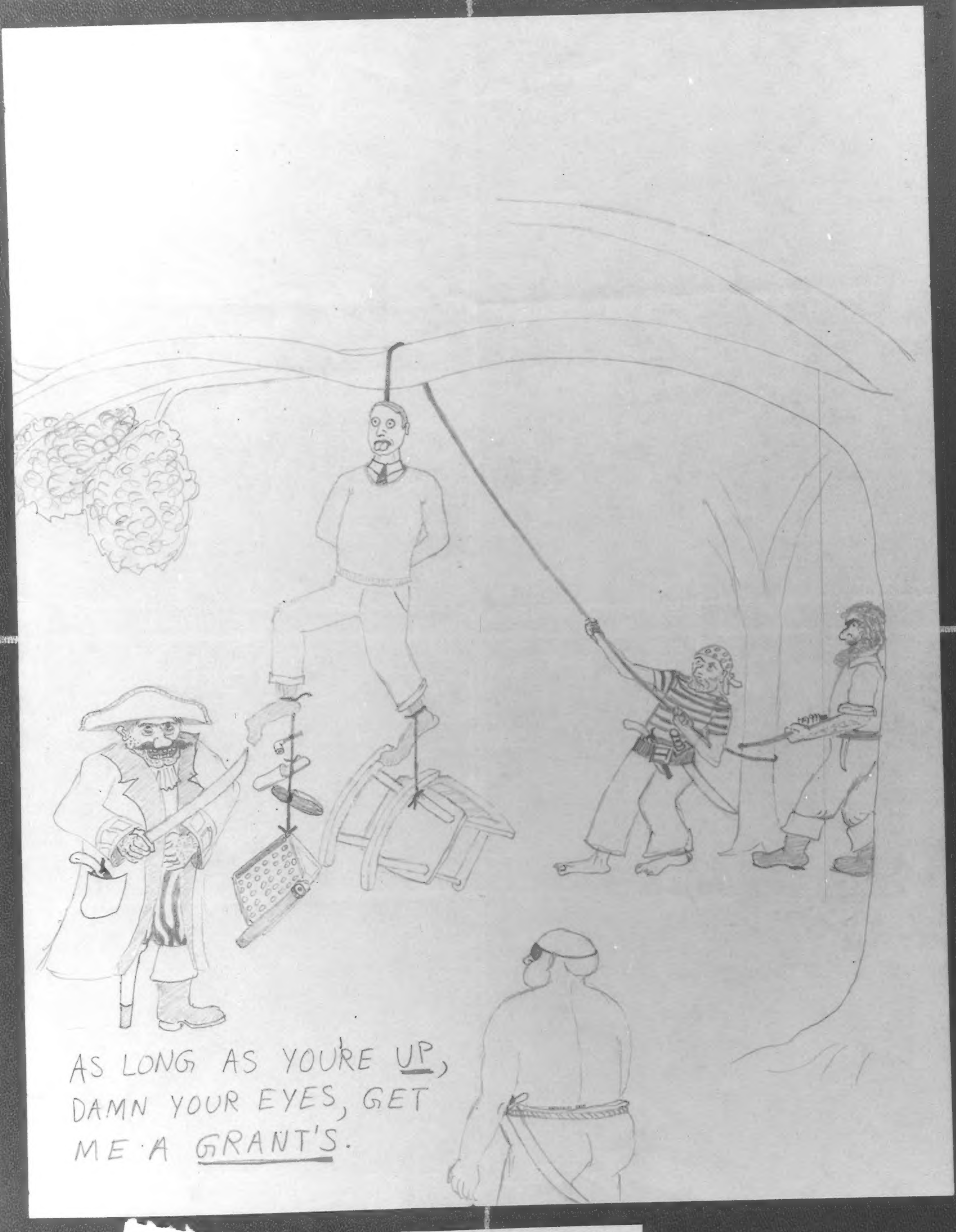


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